

Red Cap

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Category: Half-Life

Genre: Mystery

Language: English

Characters: Gordon F.

Status: Completed

Published: 2013-09-08 00:37:43

Updated: 2013-09-08 00:37:43

Packaged: 2016-04-26 21:41:27

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 5,098

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: During his escape from City 17, Gordon Freeman encounters many resistance fighters, including a strange woman known to him only as Red Cap.

Red Cap

****Red Cap****

Another missile exploded near his ear again, causing Gordon to momentarily lose his hearing. He winced for a moment, the trauma to his inner ear prompting the rest of his head to ache and throb with his pulse. Slowly sound began to color his world again, turning it from blissful silence back into the harsh war zone that was City 17. One hand gripped his assault rifle, the other searched the stairwell before him for some solid object that he could chuck into the street to locate the Combine gunner he was sure lurked there. He hated to lose his hearing, even more than he hated that bright flash of light from those little airborne and eerily silent cameras that had followed him since he first regained consciousness in this god-forsaken world. There was a Combine soldier up there that would die, oh yes the creature would pay for making his head pulse and throb with pain.

He located a piece of wood that he then chucked over the railing. Sure enough a rain of bullets rendered it to splinters. _Two on the right, three on the left, and one, more than likely mounted behind a plasma shield with a machine gun._ He ran his right hand along his side, reaching for the small compartment where he kept his grenades. _Two left, better make 'em count._ Gordon quickly stood, peeking up between the slats in the stairwell, and out into the street. He pulled the pin and threw it into the nearest cluster of Combine soldiers.

_ "Grenade!" _ one announced, closely followed by a loud boom. Freeman vaulted the railing, spraying the area with bullets from his gun, and

drawing fire from the machine gun nest further up the street. He quickly darted across the cobblestone and into an open doorway, gladly exchanging the rifle for his trusted crowbar, then descended upon the crates and boxes present like an angry demon. They yielded the usual, health packs, rations, a few bullets. For a totalitarian governmental system, they sure had a lot of health-care items littering the back alleyways.

Freeman reached for the med-kit, greedily tucking it into the proper compartments on his suit. Something in the room shifted out of the corner of his eye, and he snapped his attention, along with the barrels of a few guns in that direction. A human woman, not Combine, not Vortegaunt, not Headcrab, a simple human, stood in the corner, clothed in green fatigues and wearing a red knit cap. She held a pistol close to her chest, her eyes had glazed over, her mind and better judgment having taken a holiday. Red Cap stood still, occasionally shuffling her feet, her eyes never breaking away from the shiny patch of tile on the floor. Gordon studied her, stepping away from the doorway and gathering his items. Outside he could hear Combine radios cackle as they gave reports on the current situation.

The situation was a no-brainer. Shoot anything that moved.

Freeman held out a med-kit to her, his own eyes burdened with the exact opposite emotion. His gaze had become predatory, calculating, and defiant, made all the more frightening when viewed from behind his otherwise nerdy glasses. At one time he had been employed by Black Mesa, and the only flaw he had developed in his brief career, was his unending desire to continue to draw breath. That desire had landed him here, City 17, in a situation that seemed bleaker the longer he remained in it. For a moment he read the fear in her eyes, and wondered what Red Cap had been in her past life. Did she have a past life? He had been gone for twenty years. Perhaps she was a lawyer, or a homemaker? How old was she anyway? By her terrified expression and stiff body, she could fall anywhere between fifteen and thirty. If she was over twenty years of age, then she was old enough to remember what life was like before the shit hit the fan. Old enough to remember going to the mall with her friends, or out to eat, or watching a movie instead of living one.

He left the med-kit at her feet. He didn't know what was in the damn things, just some kind of glowing green liquid that made a body feel better. The bullets were his. He needed them more than she did. Gordon passed by the woman, into another long hall bordered by closed and locked doors. The hall was stuffy, a cross-breeze would do the area some good. The smell of dust and spilled fluids thickened the air.

"Wait! I'm going with you!" Red Cap suddenly rounded the corner, pistol held ready. Her eyes were wide with fear and something else that Gordon didn't want to see. Hope. Dammit, his very presence had given her hope. Hope was a thing with feathers, and in his experience, very sharp teeth. He had unconsciously managed to snap her out of her stupor and encouraged her to follow him. Freeman didn't say a word, only nodded and began walking up the hall, ready to attack. Red Cap didn't make a sound. Good little soldier.

Two buildings later, Gordon had acquired quite a collection of City 17's scraps. Red Cap had been joined by Green Cap, another woman, two

medics, and three of the stupidest most talkative men Freeman ever had the displeasure of keeping company with. The men had a nasty habit of screaming the name of whatever enemy was in the area, blowing any attempt of stealth to pieces. More than once, he had been tempted to shoot a few of them and chalk it up to friendly fire. Gordon preferred the women, they didn't talk, didn't give away his position, and more importantly, didn't scream "HE DCRAB!!!" or "COMB1N3!!!" right in his ear.

The medics were another story. They helped him continue his metabolic processes, and seemed to have a never-ending supply of med-kits secreted away somewhere on their person, but they seemed to lack the brains needed for survival. These were people, yes, they were citizens. Men and Women who had gone about their daily lives eating, drinking, smiling, playing, singing, dancing, fighting, cursing, driving, thinking, talking and farting before Gordon's little mishap at Black Mesa. Was it fate? Was it an accident? Was all this indeed his fault? No, no, and no. He didn't have time to dwell on that now. He couldn't have predicted what would have happened at Black Mesa, and all of this was not ****just**** his fault. No, one man could not have caused the Dictionary definition for "Monumental Fuck-Up" of these proportions. No, this was definitely a group effort. And now all of these citizens had to pay the price for it. They had been ripped from their safe perceptions of reality and deposited into this nightmare where the dead walked and aliens ruled.

Gordon ran the streets of City 17 with his rag-tag group of freedom fighters following behind or holding defensive positions around corners and doorways. These people once had lives. Now they improvised with stolen weapons, amateur battle tactics, and sheer determination to live. The same damn stubborn trait that gotten him in trouble back at Black Mesa. Freeman didn't want all these people tagging along. The Combine were after him alone, and they would plow through anyone in their way. These people would always be in danger as long as they accompanied him.

He left the streets, favoring the tighter and potentially secluded confines of the buildings around him. Gordon had lost count of how many had joined him, and how many had lost their lives. He occasionally found small pockets of resistance fighters locked tightly away in small rooms with enough supplies and rations for a few days. The rumors and news traveled that all remaining citizens were to escape the city via train. An Underground Railway had been established to help move large groups of people out. Freeman was unknowingly clearing the way for most of these refugees.

At one point Gordon had turned around in some small stairway, and saw her again, Red Cap. It couldn't have been the same woman, she would have been shot long ago or left his company at one of the many checkpoints since. But he felt compelled to believe that this was her. Those same haunted eyes, pistol held close to her chest, the same eerily quiet way of shuffling in a corner. He had felt compassion for these people before, but now he felt something different toward just this one. He could identify with her. Red Cap had been at his back the entire time, providing cover fire and handing him ammo as he needed it. All this time he had taken Red Cap for granted, but she had been there, directing others, and keeping otherwise suicidal medics under control. For the first time since coming to this city, he felt as if he were part of a team instead of just running solo.

Then they entered the collapsed tunnel system where small pockets of Combine soldiers kept him contained by constant fire. Red Cap at some point had acquired a better gun and provided cover fire allowing Gordon the chance to place a few grenades within the Combine ranks. Her eyes no longer showed fear, her moves had become more confident, her reflexes also greatly improved. Instead of glassy terror written across her face, she now shared the same predatory gaze that Freeman himself wore. She followed him up the tunnels, through rubble and ventilation shafts until they came to a point where she could no longer continue. Radioactive chemicals had spilled, either by Combine design or fate.

Red Cap stayed behind, holding down that end of the tunnel while Freeman crawled through the radioactive mess to freedom on the other side. Another street, another building, more fighting. He cleared the last two rooms in the building, raided crates for supplies, and then moved on. Keep on moving and they would have trouble tracking him. _What is with all the watermelons?_ Barney had said to get to the train station. Once he made it to the train station, he could get out of City 17. As long as he kept his goal simple, he could make it. Did Red Cap make it to the train station? Why the hell was he concerned about Red Cap when there were so many others that needed his help?

He held his semi-auto at the ready, and loaded a fresh clip. Gordon peeked out into the street, and cursed as he saw the tell-tale linear blue light that indicated a sniper was nearby. The semi-auto wasn't going to work. He instead pulled out his crowbar to take out others he may encounter when he was in the process of running from the sniper. In case of close-quarters combat, nothing worked better than ten pounds of hooked steel to the face. Freeman waited until the sniper had completed his sweep of the area, then ran, keeping close to the wall and trying to find some safe place to use as cover. He slid to safety behind an overturned truck. The sniper angrily shot at the vehicle and the surrounding area. For the moment he could breathe, and find another way out of this killing field. He looked around, searching the rubble-strewn streets for another avenue of escape, when his gaze passed over a curious sight.

A pole, perhaps once part of a fence post or even the exhaust system of a car, extended out in the middle of the intersection at an angle. At the top of the pole somebody had placed a red cap. It shifted in the breeze, but held fast. For a moment Freeman was no longer in the middle of an intersection in some city he had never heard of, instead he found himself back in History class in college. History was never his strong point, he specialized in math and science, but he did try to give his nod to history. The red cap mounted on the pole was a symbol of some sort, and it had a name—what was it again? It watched it flutter for a moment, the smell of decaying bodies and dusty streets became overridden by the scent of pencils and ink pens, fresh loose-leaf paper, and vinyl binders. The scent of chalk and blackboards and the overpowering scent of vanilla the girl next to him had worn constantly. Gordon had asked her out a couple of times, she would giggle, toss her hair and once gave him the wrong number. History class smelled like vanilla and chalk.

Phrygian Cap.

Some part of him remembered at least. Yes, the Phrygian Cap. Also

known as the Cap of Liberty. A symbol of freedom, of throwing off the chains of oppression and fighting against the establishment. A symbol that had lasted through the ages, and continued to hold firmly to its meaning in light of recent events.

Another bullet from the sniper hit a little closer to home, bringing him back to the present. He scanned the street, the smell of chalk and vanilla forgotten. Something moved on the side street. Gordon quickly aimed his pistol in that direction, then lowered it. Red Cap stood there, leaning against the side of a building, hiding from the sniper. She had made it out of the tunnel! Red Cap had made it. Freeman turned his attention to the sniper. Once again he waited for the sniper to pass him over, then ran across the intersection. He hit the wall on the side street, narrowly escaping sniper fire. Red Cap had moved on—or had she? There was nowhere here for her to run. No, wait, there she was. He saw her in a doorway, pistol at the ready, her gaze smooth and a doll-like. Gordon ran toward her, as soon as he moved, she lifted from the wall and rounded the corner deeper within the building.

Once inside, he found more supplies, and more Combine soldiers. Red Cap was already far ahead of him, standing silent and still in a small corner while gunfire erupted around her. If she moved, she would get shot. Freeman pulled a grenade from his waist, and then threw it up the hall. He never thought that screams heard through a digital filter could be so pleasant. He peeked around the corner after the boom and picked off a few stragglers. Red Cap had moved on.

That struck him as odd for a moment. The only people who really seemed to know their way around were Alyx and Barney. The rest of the civilians-turned guerrillas were disoriented, and for the most part, seemed to use him as a human shield. Except the medics, the medics would triumphantly tell everyone else with him to "Follow Freeman!" then promptly jump into the middle of the firefight. Was Red Cap now a medic-in-training? He hoped not. She had made it this far.

Another corner, another hall, more soldiers. Red Cap was just out of reach. Always at the edge of his vision, always running up the stairs ahead of him, always standing still against a wall. The same pistol held to her chest, the same blank expression smeared over her features. Like a ghost.

No, no, no, and no. Freeman countered the thought in his mind. _Zombies are hard enough to kill. I don't want to think about what it would take to fight off ghosts in the event the Combine start using THEM to come after me! Aah! Ghostly head-crabs!_

Normally Freeman prided himself on his ability to stay firmly rooted in the safe womb of math and matter. It helped him to analyze every situation with cold grace, science fact and/or theory. It was human nature to chalk up the unexplained into the realm of the supernatural. Zombies were not truly Zombies, they were merely humans who had their bodies overcome by an alien parasite. They were just a pain in his ass, and inhaled bullets. Combine, also alien, also bound by the rules of math and physics. Bullets had trajectories, explosives had a blast radius, and when a room was bathed in fire, his own fragile human body had a flash point. And Red Cap—

Red Cap was a hallucination brought on by severe stress and numerous

blunt impacts to his unprotected noggin. There, she had a definition. He could move on. Yet there she was, on an opposite rooftop, telling another rebel to lower the drawbridge so Freeman could pass. Great, now his environment was interacting with his hallucination. Well, that was all just dandy considering that he had been dropped on a train to hell, teleported all over the place, had visited another dimension, fought the locals there, and been put into some kind of stasis thing or another by a mysterious man with a briefcase. So the Resistance fighters, if they interacted with a physical manifestations of an imbalance of the chemicals in his brain, then it couldn't possibly be any worse than what he already been through!

The drawbridge lowered, and Gordon ran across, dodging gunfire and other objects intent on ending his life prematurely. His feet hit the opposite roof and he kept right on running. He could see her just ahead, rounding another corner, down a stairwell, up a hall. More Resistance fighters flanked him, handing him med kits and ammunition. Both were needed, but at the moment his full attention was on that damned Red Cap. She was speaking to people ahead, getting them to move, manipulating them. She had to be a Combine spy. She had infiltrated the ranks of the Resistance and now led innocent people into more danger. Never mind that so far she had only been helpful. Spies were often helpful to their prey long enough to gain their trust. That had to be it. There was no other explanation. Even at a full HEV suit-fueled sprint, Freeman still couldn't keep up with her. Barney had told him to get to the train station. He repeated to himself. Keep the mission simple. The Resistance was making a final push there to evacuate the people of City 17 before the Citadel imploded or worse. In light of the Red Cap, that mission was the farthest thing from his mind.

Freeman and his newest band of cannon fodder spilled into the streets again, and crossed to another building. A grenade exploded to his right, his hearing left again, this time replaced with almost serene silence. The silence of desks in an empty classroom, then with the ringing of the bell in his ears, school was back in session. He scrambled into the building, and into a Combine ambush. Through the fighting, the grenades, the bullets splitting the air, Gordon caught sight of her, past the Combine, through a window, and into the building across the street. Her red cap bright and ethereal as seen through dirty cracked glass. Gordon was tired of this. Even if she was a hallucination, she was having an impact on the environment. An even worse thought crept into his mind on the heels of that one. What if she was one of the Briefcase mans lackeys? Was he using her to flit in and out of reality to prompt him to react in a certain way? Well, that shit had to stop right now. If she was aligned with the Briefcase man, then perhaps it was time for Gordon to send a message. A message that stated how sick he was of all the fighting and blood, and losing his damned hearing.

He hid behind some of the most durable barrels he had ever had the good fortune to encounter, then swapped out his sub machine gun for something a little more suitable. The rocket launcher. Freeman didn't care what the walls were made out of, nothing was going to stop rocket-propelled explosive goodness. He popped out from behind the barrels much like those annoying gophers in the arcade game, and squeezed the trigger. The room flashed red for a moment, and then the Combine along with most of the wall vanished in great clouds of dust and fire. Gordon adjusted his aim, through the hole he just created,

and fired again, obliterating the building across the street. The wall collapsed and fell, conveniently blocking off the approaching Combine and creating a path of rubble from one building to the next. Freeman slung the rocket launcher back over his shoulder and quickly closed the distance. She was here somewhere. There was nowhere else to run, or was there?

The few remaining Resistance fighters followed him, raiding Combine corpses to upgrade their weapons or grab more ammo. "Here, take this!" Gordon didn't acknowledge the speaker, only held his hand out until something fell into it. The suit did the rest. The building was large, and thankfully not another hospital. It seemed to have been either an office complex or mini-mall in a past life, and now provided much needed cover and rest for the lucky few who had made it through the streets—along with the odd headcrab. Once Gordon finished smacking the thing away with the crowbar, another voice chimed in. "Here! Patch yourself up!"

_ Is my face bleeding that badly?_ Freeman looked down at the new med kit to land in his hand. More of that weird green mutagen stuff bubbled around the inside. For a moment he pondered if the liquid inside was a synthetic version of the healing pools back on Zen. Maybe the Briefcase man would know. Maybe if Gordon made it out of this with most of his wits intact he could pummel a response out of him. After Vortegaunts and Striders and Headcrabs and Zombies, what was one more weird extra-dimensional being? They all bled in the end, the trick was to find out _how._

Speaking of extra-dimensional beings, there she was again. Freeman and company spilled into a large open hall, lined with closed and boarded shops on either side. A second floor with a balcony was visible, and there stood Red Cap. Not really standing per say, but leaning against a pillar upstairs, pistol, clouded eyes, red cap, the works. This time however her gaze lifted from the ground. Dull brown eyes met his own, almost as if she were challenging him. That was not what Gordon wanted to see. He reacted, jumping on top of the nearest overturned vending machine, then scrambled up the wall, grabbing the railing, and pulling himself over. As he neared her, Red Cap lifted from the wall and began running down another corridor. Freeman followed. Hallucination or not, she needed to stop. He had questions, and she would give him answers.

She ran up another hall, twisting and turning seemingly into patterns too complex for a simple floor plan. Red Cap didn't seem to slow, or loose her way. She navigated these halls with familiarity. Gordon meanwhile stumbled over warped and decaying floors, and failing to slow her by any other method, he finally resorted to pulling out his magnum and began taking shots at her. Aiming mainly for the legs. He wanted her alive, he wanted her to _talk._ If she was missing her head that could be problematic. Red Cap opened a door and slipped inside, then closed it firmly behind her. Freeman hit the door a moment later, testing the handle and finding it locked. That was okay, he had the crowbar. A nice big one that firemen normally carried for just this purpose, to open locked or stuck doors. With no small amount of finesse, Gordon gracefully popped the door open, then charged into the room.

Empty, save for an over turned desk, and a wall of mostly intact yet boarded up windows. Freeman drew his attention to the landscape outside the windows. A smooth expanse of rooftop, and beyond it, the

train station and a bright Red Cap making a run for it. Gordon broke the nearest widow and judged the distance of the fall. One floor, he could do that in his sleep by now. The suit bore the brunt of the impact, but he still felt the bones in his ankle crack and pop for the seventh time that day. _"Morphine administered."_ That synthetic voice breathed near his ear. Freeman limped a few steps before breaking into a run. Red Cap was still heading for the train station. If she made it there, all of his hard work would be ruined. He couldn't let this Combine spy make it there before he had the chance to at least know whose side she was on.

He used all the power he could muster in his suit to enhance his sprint range. For the first time that day, Gordon was gaining on her. She neared the edge of the roof, beyond he could see stacks of overturned cars and crates that could be used as a way down. She paused once to examine her path, and Freeman took this opportunity to pounce. Gordon flew through the air, his arms held wide, the crowbar firmly gripped in his right hand. His shoulder met her back, but instead of the comforting crunch of flesh, it felt as if he jumped through a hologram. His body passed through hers completely, arms closing before him as his body continued to sail effortlessly over the edge of the roof. There were indeed cars and crates that could be used as a way down, but they were in the _other_ direction. No, Freeman found himself staring down into the bed of a truck filled to the brim with supply crates that didn't look very soft. Faced with this new dilemma, Gordon allowed his weight to continue traveling forward, tucking his knees in, causing his body to rotate mid-air, so now it seemed that he was about to perform a cannonball into the bed of the truck. In his experience, the safest place to land was flat on your back.

His upper back near his shoulders hit first, sending an ungodly tremor through his spine and up his neck before settling in his head. _"Blunt trauma-"_ Gordon's tailbone was the next to hit, cracking his pelvis and femurs respectively. _"Compound fracture detect-"_ The wood crates gave way under his weight, spilling ammunition and med kits over the back of the truck and onto the pavement. _"Morphine administered."_ Freeman felt his weight settle to the tune of that insane beeping in his ear. _"Se-eak me-di-cal at-tention!"_

Gordon drew in one heavy painful breath. _No shit._

"Gordon!"

_ At least I didn't lose my hearing this time._

"Gordon! Is that you?"

Freeman somehow managed to find the strength to turn his head and see Barney climbing over the side of the truck.

"Oh man! It is you! I saw something fall from up there, glad I didn't shoot huh?"

_ Almost wish you had._

"Come on out of there! We still need you!" Barney reached out, grabbing both the crowbar and Freemans hand, then pulled him up. Gordon yelled as his back popped and clicked into place. "Hehe, guess that HEV suit can't absorb everything!"

_ Why must he end each sentence with an exclamation point?_

Gordon gained his feet and climbed out of the truck.

"We're almost there, I need your help to escort these people to the train, you'll find a recharge station over there, and plenty of ammo in here, we're counting on you Gordon!"

Freeman stumbled into the building, the one he had been running along the top of chasing an honest-to-god-damned ghost. He leaned against the wall, drawing energy as quickly as the suit could manage.

"Hey! Looks like you have something in your hand there Gordon!"

Gordon dumbly looked at his right hand holding the crowbar first, then his left hand. Clutched in his fingers was a faded threadbare Red Cap, with a cartoon cat stitched on one side. How did that get there?

"You found it."

Freeman snapped his attention to the source of the voice. It was her. The girl he had met in the building and left in the tunnels. She still carried the assault rifle he had last seen her with. Her eyes were bright and vibrant, hopeful. He met those eyes once, then looked to the cap in his hand.

"You found my cap," she smiled, her face dirty and tear stained, brown hair wet with sweat and blood from many battles during her journey.

For the second time that day, Freeman remembered the smell of vanilla and chalk. How mundane and safe that class had been in a time and a continent far away. "Uhâ€|here," he held it out, and she giggled, accepting it and pulling it over her sweaty curls.

Gordon Freeman took a moment to reload all of his weapons and looked back over his shoulder at the gathered mass of humans. They huddled, frightened yet hopeful, determined to live. Red Caps, Green Caps, Brown Capsâ€|all led by one crazy bastard in a bright orange suit.

Four ran to his side, carrying weapons of varying sizes and shapes. And of course it was the Medic who let out the first cry before running out into the battlefield.

"FOLLOW FREEMAN!"

Follow Freeman indeed. Gordon sighed, choosing a weapon, then once again joined the battle.

End.

* * *

><p>Authors note: (kinda thought this story would be outdated by now. 0_0)_ I was inspired to write this due a random bit of AI in the Half Life 2 game. While playing I picked up a group

of cannon fodder lackeys. Usually you get these guys and they die off pretty quicklyâ€¦except one. A chick wearing a red cap. At some point I turned around and she was still there, after trekking through numerous stages. She had even picked up a few new weapons along the way. From that point she became my good luck charm, and if she were ever killed, I'd start the stage over again and ensured that she made it through. =^_ ^=

End
file.